

# OFF THE BEAT

## How you gonna keep 'em down in academe after they've seen TV?

We in America keep hearing how the Russians manage somehow to educate their young more seriously and more effectively than we do. This time it's the turn of mathematics and the mathematical sciences. In a report made public by the University of Chicago, Prof. Izaak Wirszup, director of the NSF's Survey of Recent East European Mathematical Literature, warns us that young Russians or Turkmen or Khazaks or Byelorussians get 10 years of math from counting to calculus, five years of physics, four of chemistry, five and a half of biology, one of astronomy. The list goes even a little longer, and it is all compulsory.

The mathematics and science offering of the average American high school simply has no standing against that list, especially if one knows some of the Soviet textbooks Wirszup cites, or against curricula in the same subjects in lycées or gymnasien in Switzerland, Norway or Hungary. And of what American schools offer few kids will partake.

It was not ever thus. In halcyon days of ancient Greece young men voluntarily trotted after the Peripatetics to keep their place in the discussion. Of their own free will they sat on the porch with the Stoics and discussed the hardships of life (rather unstoically sheltered from the weather all the while). What has happened?

This is obviously the place to wave the tattered peacock banner of McLuhanism. Well, yes, but not exactly. It's not that the medium has become the message. It always was a large part of the message. In their many-sided wisdom the ancient Greeks named the Stoics' philosophy after the porch, not after their metaphysical jargon. But it is true that proliferation of media in recent years has wrought a qualitative change.

The ancient Greeks of course had fewer amusements and gratifications. Theatre was a seasonal thing, and big religious feasts a few times a year. A gratification obtained was a seldom thing and likely to provoke contemplation. So when the older men and the younger men began to converse on the exercise field, the talk would become serious.

A related point is that gratification took effort. Running naked around a field in the Athenian winter is a gratification, especially after it's over, but it's not the sort of gratification one would imagine the stereotypical hippie of 1968 getting in line for. The man who made the run was likely

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to be inspired to some fundamental question, beginning with: What am I doing here?

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Mindless gratifications are not necessarily evil in themselves. Like other organs the mind needs an occasional rest, but not a total, lifelong one. Maybe the Soviet difference is that they never had the Aquarian outburst. They have resolutely tried to exclude everything since Dada that represented a revolt against rationality, and they have mostly succeeded.

It is not necessary to assume that they are better off for that. Our Cassandras always make everything in the Soviet Union look perfect. If they like Russia so much, why don't they...? There is much that is

wrong in the Soviet method of intellectual indoctrination. We are probably better off for having had the Aquarian revolution. It taught many of us a new appreciation for the nonrational.

But even those of us who aspire to live in Marin county in a house with a hot tub should not throw out the rational baby with the bath water. How to achieve it? What will motivate modern kids (and other people) to seek again some of the gratifications achievable through intellection? This is where there may really be no answers. Motivations are like pots: Too much watching and they don't boil. The ancient Greek may have been motivated by the breeze ruffling his hair. Who can say what will stir minds today, especially little-used minds? We can only hope that by direction or indirection or by divine intervention (pray for a deus ex machina) we find ways to bring modern students to the condition of the young Greek, contemplating his own existence and framing grammatical questions—not just chanting Om.

—Dietrick E. Thomsen